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ABSTRACT

This position paper is a product of Australia's Primary English Teaching Association. The paper looks at the capabilities of Australian children upon their entry into kindergarten. It argues that a new breed of learners needs a new set of practices to support their literacy learning. The paper focuses on a study in which writing samples were collected from five New South Wales (NSW) schools. It states that the samples were drawn from the western and northern suburbs of Sydney and from the south and central coasts of NSW and represent very diverse student populations. It also states that the study found that most of the samples collected indicated that children begin school with a diverse knowledge of how print works and that most samples revealed a high level of literacy expertise on the new kindergartners' part. The paper concludes that too many teachers waste children's time by teaching them what they already know, and it outlines some principles for instructional change. (Includes 19 samples of kindergartners' writing.) (NKA)

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More than a sound a week

KAYE LOWE
with TRUDIE HILL
& VAL DELANY

More than ever before, today's Kindergarten students begin their formal schooling with extensive knowledge of how literacy works. But have the methods we use to teach these students changed accordingly?

This PEN looks at the capabilities of children upon their entry into Kindergarten. It argues that a new breed of learners needs a new set of practices to support their literacy learning.

Part 1: Observations

When they start at school, children are already readers and writers. In their study of literacy-learning environments in birth-to-five settings, Beecher and Arthur (2001) recorded and documented a host of literacy-rich practices among children. A number of these feature writing, and writing-like representations.

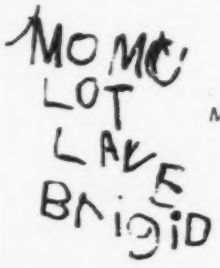
In the study that is the focus of this PEN, we collected writing samples from five NSW schools. Drawn from the western and northern suburbs of Sydney, and from the south coast and the central coast of NSW, the schools catered for very diverse student populations. The samples were produced by students on their first day at school. They prompted us to challenge the all-too-common practice of teachers who continue to teach a sound a week.

Most of the samples we collected indicate that children begin school with a diverse knowledge of how print works. Most of the samples reveal that children already have a level of literacy expertise that is being overlooked. Teachers need to tap into this expertise from day one, or they run the risk of producing bored, switched-off writers.

Children generally begin school with a great desire to learn. Some believe that they can accomplish writing on the first day; others have already mastered it; and still others are content with their squiggles. The sad thing is that their passion often wanes within a few weeks. Without the right support, they become indoctrinated into a system that fails to acknowledge that they are unique and dynamic learners.

Children's informal literacy experiences prior to school are many and varied. Too many teachers are wasting children's valuable time by teaching them what they already know.

Brigid already knew a lot about writing prior to her entry into Kindergarten. When she was three, she produced this card for her mother (Sample 1).



Mum, lots of love, Brigid

Sample 1: Card

At age four, she produced a recipe for biscuits that she wanted to cook (Sample 2).

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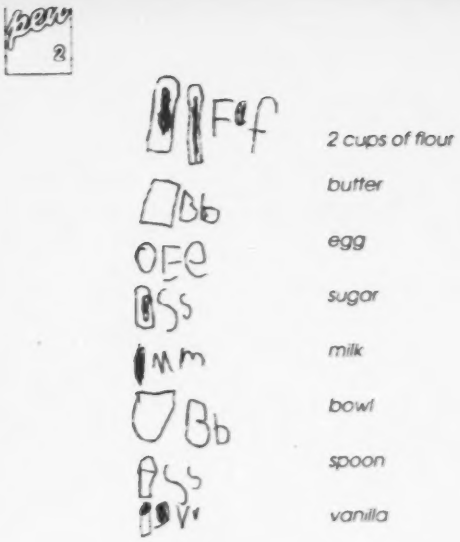


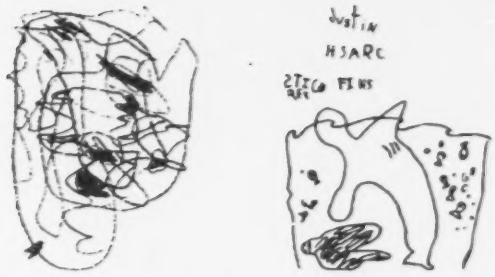
Sample 2: Recipe

Brigid's writing demonstrates that she understands the recipe format, knows about spatial concepts (as the ingredients and cooking utensils are listed down the page) and knows a lot about how writing works.

We collected writing samples at parent–child–teacher interviews approximately six months before the children started Kindergarten. At the interviews, the children were asked to write their names. The teacher then suggested that they "see what else" they could write. The resulting samples showed that the children had a fundamental understanding of literacy. Then, on day one of Kindergarten, we collected further samples, using similar prompts. Emma's and Andrew's responses (Sample 3) are representative of the samples collected at each point.

Sample 3: Writing samples before school entry and on day one of school

However, a wide range of proficiency is evident, from the picture-like scribbles of Simon to the more sophisticated writing of Justin (Sample 4).

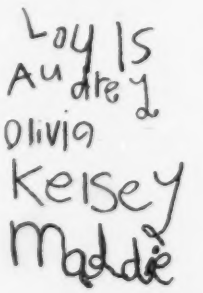


Sample 4: Diverse writing on day one of school

Print-like features are common in day-one samples. Writing is represented horizontally, and words are generally represented by recognisable letters. Some students practise variations of the same letter, as in the example of Terry (Sample 5).

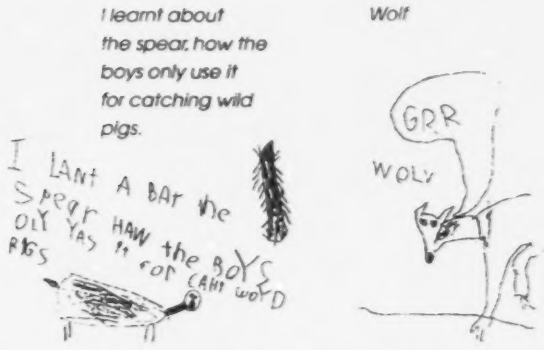
Sample 5: Using print-like conventions

Terry experiments with upper- and lower-case 'I'. Other students experiment with letters in the sign-on book used in one of the classrooms. Flourishes and fancy squiggles are used to embellish what is a most important personal accomplishment — a signature. Attempts at joining letters are apparent. Audrey attempts a fancy 'y', and Kelsey replicates her creative style (Sample 6).



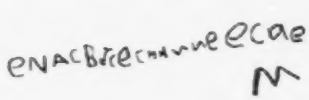
Sample 6: Signatures

Kindergarten students quickly demonstrate their understandings of writing forms. In the first few weeks, the focus students produced a range of forms, including postcards, factual recounts, fictional narratives made into books, recipes, and cartoons using speech bubbles (Sample 7).



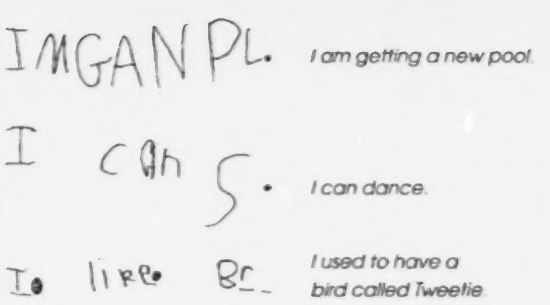
Sample 7: Use of text forms and conventions

The use of spaces between words varied. Some students showed little understanding of this convention, and included no spaces (Sample 8).



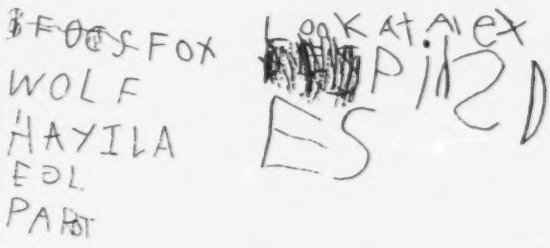
Sample 8: Unbroken text string

Others experimented with spaces, punctuation, capitalisation and full stops (Sample 9).



Sample 9: Awareness of spacing, case and punctuation

Students' day-one work also shows evidence of self-correction (Sample 10).



Sample 10: Self-corrected writing

What do these samples show? Clearly, many children already know *how* to write: they are using writing tools to produce letters that are in relationship and proportion to one another. Equally, it is clear that they know a lot *about* writing: that it is a system of communication with word-, sentence- and text-level conventions. In other words, Kindergarten students understand much of what teachers think they need to be taught! By focusing on a sound a week, teachers can greatly devalue students' prior learning.

Part 2: Teaching practices

Our observations and collected samples from Kindergarten classrooms helped us to clarify the kind of learning environments in which students enjoy quality writing experiences. What are the features of classrooms that enable these experiences?

The features of writing-friendly Kindergarten classrooms

High expectations

From day one, students read and write. They are seen as readers and writers irrespective of their level of sophistication and experience. Sample 11 demonstrates how the teacher values this student's attempts at writing. The teacher has responded to the writing with a question that reassures the student that the message has been communicated and that the writer is respected.

Sample 11: Teacher response validating beginning writing

Time to write

Students have uninterrupted time to write in classrooms that are rich in print. Daily opportunities are provided to write for a known purpose and a real audience. The teacher conducts 'think-aloud' demonstrations, shares good literature and encourages students to experiment. In a conversation with his teacher (Sample 12), Alec reflects on his writing progress from the beginning of the year.

Teacher	*What do you think about your writing?*
Alec	*Mm ... I think I have been doing well over the years ... well over the months.*
Teacher	*What has helped you?*
Alec	*That I am growing up and I have done it a lot.*

Sample 12: Teacher-Student evaluation transcript

Authentic practice

Students engage in writing for an ever-changing range of purposes and audiences. Justin, for example, produced a book within weeks of starting school (Sample 13). This practice soon snowballed, with other students following his lead.

Sample 13: *Animals, Fur, Feathers.* Illustrated by Justin

Justin's mother explained that when Justin was a toddler, his father regularly communicated by fax when he was overseas. He sent faxes from his hotel, including a plan of the room. This communication served as a powerful demonstration of writing for a special audience and a real purpose. Students in Kindergarten need to experience genuine purposes for writing if they are to develop a desire to write.

Some effective strategies that cater for a range of audiences and purposes include:

- a noticeboard for students and parents
- postcards for parents on open day
- faxes to children in hospital

- a sign-on book that is left near the door for students to sign as they enter the room
- special-occasion invitations written to parents and carers
- computer messages — students arrive at school to find short, animated text moving across the class computer screen
- teacher/student-made books
- author of the week — each week, a different student is nominated to be 'author of the week'. Published writing samples are displayed in a special showcase
- authors' circles — students regularly share their writing in small groups and with the whole class.

Resources to support writing

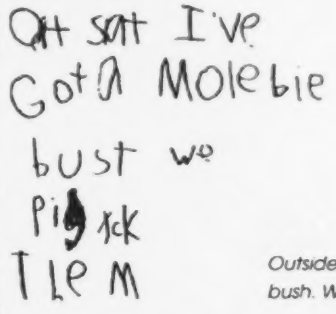
Students have access to writing centres in print-rich classrooms that create an inviting space in which they interact with each other and with a range of texts. Displays are regularly updated and resources are accessible, including:

- papers, booklets, writing pads and media for daily writing
- word walls — teacher and students build a wall of words listed under the letters of the alphabet. The words are removable and are designed to be used by students at their desks
- alphabet cards
- a class letterbox — for example, the teacher writes a letter from Fred the Fairy and Lan the Leprechaun, and puts it in a letterbox. The letter is read aloud each morning, and the class constructs a joint response. The letters are made into a big book, and students may continue to correspond on an individual basis. The letters sometimes instruct the students to look elsewhere for hidden messages
- picture dictionaries
- labels and signs
- book bags — initially, the students and teacher brainstorm topics to write books about. Large scrapbooks are decorated, and the title is written on the covers, for example *Who Am I?, Joke Book, Fact Book, Pets.* The books are put in a bag with a range of coloured pencils, glitter, markers and collage materials. Each night, a student is scheduled to take a book bag home. Parents/Carers are asked to help their child to complete a piece of writing for the book
- tactile resources, for example magnetic and foam letters and auditory aids.

Relationship between writing and the development of phonemic awareness

Writing activities are used to build letter–sound relationships. It is during writing, rather than reading, that students construct words using their knowledge of letter–sound correspondences. Focusing on these relationships in writing is a meaningful and sensible way to build relevant associations between letters and sounds. Writers construct words letter by letter. As they do, they become conscious of spelling patterns, sequencing of letters and configuration clues.

Readers, on the other hand, often mistakenly believe that they need to take words apart using their knowledge of letters and sounds. This process distracts from the text; the words are left decoded into meaningless and fragmented units. This Kindergarten student (Sample 14) illustrates a growing awareness of letter–sound relationships.



Outside, I've got a mulberry bush. We picked them.

Teacher *If you want to write a word like 'mulberry', what do you do?*

Student *I sound it out, because it is not around the room ... If I wanted to write 'bush', 's-h' says 'sh'. This is 'bust', not 'bush'.*

Sample 14: Discussion of writing showing phonemic awareness

Supportive teacher-student interactions

The teacher builds relationships that support readers and writers who are willing to take risks and experiment with their growing understandings. The teacher moves around the room, talking and listening to students, scribing when necessary and sharing what is written. The teacher knows

what the students can do, and what they need to be aware of next. Sample 15 shows that this teacher has photocopied a student's work to be included in a portfolio. On the bottom, she identifies the writing achievements evident in this text, and suggests what the student should focus on next.

Sample 15: Teacher-annotated work sample for portfolio entry

In successful writing classrooms, teachers engage in genuine conversations. They know their students' strengths and weaknesses, interests, likes and dislikes, hobbies, pets, sports, favourite TV shows and bands, friends and family. Topics of conversation are the fodder for writing. Engaging in lots of talk before writing ensures that the students have something to write about. Oral rehearsals give the students a place to gather their thoughts and prepare for writing. Self-confidence is nurtured in these conversations, and the students gain reassurance that what they have to write is worthwhile and valued. Real writers experience authentic engagement with their texts. Instead of responding with "Good boy/girl", the teacher's responses take the writer back to the writing. For example:

- "Where did you get your idea?"
- "How did you decide on this beginning?"
- "I like how you have ..."
- "How did you know to ...?"

Another feature of supportive teacher–student interaction is that teachers allow students to read their texts and explain what they know. When teachers guess at what students have written, they can discourage and alienate them, as the following example (Sample 16) shows. In this case, the teacher started from her interpretation of the text and asked a somewhat embarrassed student: "What do you mean, 'He did poo'?". The student, turning red, explained that the text in fact said: "He died 900 years ago".

Sample 16: Misinterpreted student text

A more effective response might have been:

- "What have you written?"
- "Tell me about your writing."
- "I can't wait to hear your story. Would you like to read it to me?"

Principles for change

We have seen what Kindergarten classrooms look like when meaningful and positive writing experiences are taking place. These features provide tangible teaching goals. In concluding this PEN, we want to identify four important principles that will inform and direct teachers towards these goals:

- Know your learners.
- Know the writing process.
- Enlist the help of parents/carers.
- Celebrate success.

Know your learners

Teachers need to know whom they are teaching. As we have indicated above, this extends into exploring students' range of interests, and their home/community circumstances. It also means knowing where students are 'at' in their learning. One effective assessment strategy

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is to use the students as 'informers of their own progress'. If students recognise their own growth and accomplishments, they take more responsibility for their learning, and a greater sense of pride becomes apparent. In order for this to happen, the right questions need to be asked. For example:

- "Tell me what you have done here."
- "Which part are you happiest with? Why?"
- "Is there something you would like to change? Why?"

Questions like these give students opportunities to talk and to demonstrate what they know — and what they need to know — about the writing process.

Know the writing process

Teachers also need to know and understand the writing process, and how students develop as writers. Effective teachers of writing know how to benchmark writing: they know what to look for and what the indicators reveal about student learning. This knowledge may be supported by curriculum resources as well as collegial discussion and planning within the school. For each student, teachers should have in mind a continuum of learning that is informed by an understanding of what students know (see above) and what new skills and concepts they are capable of attaining with support.

Enlist the help of parents/carers

Today's parents can gain access to far more information about education than ever before. On the whole, they care about and support their children's literacy development. The following extracts, collected from Kindergarten students' parents, indicate the extent of the knowledge and concern that parents have about literacy learning. In the the first extract, a father who regularly includes a message in his child's lunchbox explains why he does so (Sample 17).

The idea behind the notes was to provide a thinking exercise for the three children. Therefore they may, at any time, involve puzzles, glib cliches, pithy sayings, historical references, jokes, riddles, mazes etcetera. I am not too fussed if they are above the child's intellectual level, so long as they stimulate thinking — individually, or with friends, or even asking a teacher. So, hopefully, in one process they are extending their reading, knowledge base, problem-solving, self-confidence and appreciation of their father!

Which two words have the most letters in them?

The Post Office

I cover what is real,
hide what is true,
But always bring out
the courage in you.
What am I!

Sample 17: Parent transcript and sample lunchbox riddles

The following note (Sample 18) is written by a parent. It explains the role she adopts to support her children's literacy development.

From the moment they could hold a crayon, my kids were encouraged to 'write' stories. Of course, they hadn't learned any sort of alphabet yet, but they felt empowered by 'making their own books'. Then, after these stories were 'written', I'd sit with them and they would tell me the story. All I did was encourage them with nods and "Oh" and maybe a couple of "Why is thats". Then, as they grew a bit older (say around three or four), they became part of a campaign begun by my grandmother when I was little: writing thank-you letters. If all the kids could do was draw a picture or make a few marks or letters, that was fine. The point was that they were getting practice in writing something down, even if it wasn't an actual letter.

Since they've started school, I've added a couple more things to the writing effort. This includes notes and things to them in their lunches, as well as notes left on their pillows.

Sample 18: Extract from a parent note about home literacy support

Notes like the one above reveal that many parents hold clear and carefully considered beliefs about the importance of literacy learning. These beliefs lead to particular expectations about what their children will accomplish at school. The following parent note, written to the new classroom teacher, explicitly states the parent's expectations and goals for her daughter in first term in Kindergarten.

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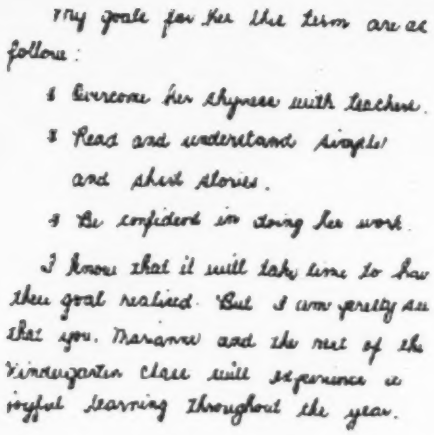
My goals for her this term are as follows:

- Overcome her shyness with teacher.
- Read and understand simple and short stories.
- Be confident in doing her work.

I know that it will take time to have these goal realised. But I am pretty sure that you, Maranne and the rest of the Kindergarten class will experience a joyful learning throughout the year.

Sample 19: Parent note to the Kindergarten teacher

These samples from parents indicate that teachers have many active educational partners outside the school. Chapter 3 of *Play and Literacy in Children's Worlds* (PETA, 2001) is recommended to teachers seeking to build home–school relationships.

About the authors

Kaye Lowe is Senior Lecturer (English) at University of Western Sydney. She has taught across a range of contexts, including preschools and primary classrooms, gaols and remand centres. She has worked in universities in Australia and the USA. Widely published in the area of literacy, she regularly presents at national and international conferences.

Trudie Hill is an education officer responsible for primary literacy with the Catholic Schools Office in the Diocese of Broken Bay. In this role, she provides professional development workshops and in-class support. Trudie has worked as a classroom teacher, special education teacher, curriculum advisor and Reading Recovery tutor.

Val Delany is principal of a Catholic primary school in the Diocese of Broken Bay. Her experience as a Reading Recovery tutor and literacy advisor has informed her literacy teaching and provided direction for her efforts in teacher professional development.

Celebrate success

Kindergarten students want to share their successes. Student-writers who experience receptive audiences are further motivated to write for authentic purposes. Their confidence is high. In one school, Kindergarten students worked in small groups to write information texts for their classroom library. On completion, they launched the titles at a gala book launch attended by parents, complete with book-signings and sales.

Experiences such as these support the expectations of young learners entering school. They are already communicators. They expect to be heard, and to have opportunities to be heard. They are anxious to improve. As this PEN has demonstrated, they are operating in ways that require a more sophisticated pedagogy than 'a sound a week'.

References and sources

Beecher, B & Arthur, L (2001) *Play and Literacy in Children's Worlds*. Primary English Teaching Association, Sydney.

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